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Nobody Saw Them Fall in *Beloved*

“Nobody saw them fall.” In Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, there are many instances of treacherous betrayal, brutal violence, and degrading dehumanization. However, the repeated line “Nobody saw them fall” indicates a brief moment of respite in a world otherwise characterized by constant hardship and overwhelming burden. Morrison illustrates this ice-skating scene in vivid detail in order to provide a moment of cathartic reveal for the plagued residents of 124 that ultimately displays Sethe’s acceptance of her former homicidal behavior.

At the end of Part One of *Beloved*, Paul D. says “You got two feet, Sethe, not four” in regards to her animalistic behavior in the murder of her first-born daughter. Clearly, it is made known repeatedly throughout the novel of Sethe’s love for her children, especially manifested in her immediate treatment of Beloved on her introduction into the novel. However, it remains that Sethe seems unable to acknowledge her murder as wrong considering her explanation to Paul D is one involving how much she loves her children, and not one characterized by heavy remorse. However, during the care-free ice-skating venture, Sethe is finally able to let go of outside judgment and view herself from an unbiased perspective. To elaborate, her constant laughter at her own skating inadequacies as well as repetition of the line “Nobody saw them fall” signifies Sethe’s immense breakthrough in escaping out from under the weight of her community’s scrutiny (her very goal in living life hidden away in 124). The idea that nobody saw their failure to skate is Sethe’s key to freedom from her past. Without outside objectification, Sethe is free to resume her relationship with her remaining and returned children. Without anyone to criticize Sethe, she is able to mother her children. Without anyone watching her, Sethe is free to love her children as she craves to love them.

Furthermore, at the mercy of cathartic relief, Sethe is again reduced to a beastly characterization in “She stayed that way for a while, on all fours.” (206). However, this time, rather than using a handsaw to cut the throat of her first-born, she is overwhelmed by laughter. This comparison, that is, of agony and bliss, relates to the reader Sethe’s dynamic development in accepting her former actions. Once metaphorically on all fours in murdering her children, Sethe is now literally on all fours laughing with them. Sethe has evolved and transcended her haunting past in the presence of her daughters, likely due to the return of her once lost first-born. If Sethe’s laughter does not indicate complete acceptance of her homicide, then it at the very least indicates her progression past it. Otherwise, the specific language “on all fours” would not have been used.

Morrison depicts a character in Sethe who is not only mentally but physically haunted by her past. In an attempt to save her daughter from a fate of slavery, Sethe committed an animalistic act by metaphorically eating her young. In dropping to all fours in the snow, resembling an animal, Sethe is immersed in a shower of love for her remaining children. These two beastly characterizations, when juxtaposed side-by-side, are indicative of Sethe’s acceptance of her past actions as well as her progression past them.

Open-ended: Is Beloved’s return to Sethe’s life better or worse for Sethe’s overall mental stability?